


Book Review: The Global Land Grab: Beyond the Hype, edited by Mayke Kaag and Annelies Zoomers.

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*The last two years have seen a huge amount of academic, policy-making and media interest in the increasingly contentious issue of land grabbing – the large-scale acquisition of land in the global South. It is a phenomenon against which locals seem defenseless, and one about which multilateral organizations such as the World Bank as well as civil-society organizations and action NGOs have become increasingly vocal. This empirically diverse volume – taking in case studies from across Africa, Asia and Latin America – seeks to step back from the hype to explore if the Global Land Grab actually exists, and what, beyond the immediately visible dynamics and practices, are the real problems? **Laura Bernal-Bermúdez** concludes that this is an important contribution to the literature.*



The Global Land Grab: Beyond the Hype. Mayke Kaag and Annelies Zoomers (eds.). Zed Books. February 2014.

This book is an important attempt to question some of the assumptions behind what the media and other stakeholders have described to us as the ‘global land grab’. The editors – [Mayke Kaag](#) and [Annelies Zoomers](#) – will inspire both academics and practitioners to look at the phenomenon more carefully, and not let themselves be overwhelmed by the numbers. According to [estimates by the Global Observatory](#), the total area of land controlled by foreign investors globally is similar to the size of Poland, with investors having acquired 32.8 million hectares since 2000. However, breaking down the shocking numbers and statistics such as this will allow for more nuanced opinions and solutions, argue Kaag and Zoomers.

Using a comparative case-study method, the authors set out to show us how land grabs play out in selected countries across three continents, all of them considered to be part of the ‘global South’. In Africa, they look at Ethiopia, Tanzania and Kenya. In Latin America, they focus on Argentina, Costa Rica and Ecuador. And in Asia, they study Indonesia, Vietnam, Cambodia, Philippines and China. Although there is not much said about the reasons for selecting these countries, from the text it is evident that these represent a wide variety of cases of land grabs, challenging the idea of land grabs as a single ‘global phenomenon’.

Looking across chapters, this more up-close picture shows us how land grabs are not a modern phenomenon attributable to climate change and recent food security crises. It is a phenomenon with a historical account that goes back decades. What we know today as a land grab, broadly described by the editors as “large-scale acquisitions of lands by foreigners to use in large agricultural projects”, is only one of the multiple manifestations of land grabs. It would be irresponsible to neglect the other manifestations that still have a great impact on human lives.

Some of the questions raised by the chapters challenge our understanding of the phenomenon and make a call for more in-depth analysis: do land grabs only include large-scale acquisitions of land? How about other types of uses of land beyond acquisition? Can there only be grabs of land or are other resources, like water, susceptible of this phenomenon? Who is involved in these land grabs? Is it only foreign firms or also national companies? What is the proportion of south-south land grabs? What is the role of local and national governments in these deals? Can a neoliberal development agenda, followed by many developing countries and encouraged by international financial organisations, and dependency theory have any role in explaining the phenomenon? What has been the role of civil society in defending their rights? The answers to all of these questions come to bear on the definition

and measurement of what the media and NGOs like [Oxfam](#) and [GRAIN](#) have come to call the 'global land grab'.



Stop land grabs demonstration, Westminster UK. Credit: [Oxfam International](#) CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

Because the space of this review doesn't allow me to go into each one of the countries, I will focus here on two cases that I found particularly interesting because they suggest that in some cases the problem goes beyond a question of lawlessness or lack of institutional capacity, and into a question of institutional design linked to a neoliberal understanding of 'development'. Ethiopia presents a case where the government included large-scale commercial agriculture as one of its core strategic objectives, creating a series of entities at the national level to promote and monitor investment. The state also participated directly in the market through the state-owned Sugar Corporation. Their emphasis on attracting foreign direct investment, leaving labour conditions and technology transfers aside, shows a particular faith in the market to balance faults. Centralisation of land adjudication allowed the government to bypass local authorities and more importantly the participation of local communities. Particularly interesting is that in 2011 the national authority in charge of monitoring investment adopted the 'Social and Environmental Codes of Practice'. This very sketchy picture of Ethiopia suggests that the land grabs in this country are supported by a national government that is taking every measure to ensure inflows of foreign direct investment and the 'effective' use of lands.

Another interesting case is found on the chapter on water grabbing in the Andean region, using Peru and Ecuador as illustrative examples, where the authors show how the neoliberal discourse of development plays a role in the phenomenon. They suggest that companies are attracted to these countries because of the favourable conditions for foreign direct investment. They also argue that there is a neoliberal capitalist discourse legitimising and defending water grabbing. This allows those in power to appeal to modernisation of practices and increase efficiency to support large-scale projects over small farmers, who are considered 'inefficient'. This process of globalisation has also shifted the power to decide over the use of resources from local communities and authorities to regulation beyond

the state included in treaties, investment agreements and codes of conducts. Businesses are increasingly having a larger role in regulation, at the expense of the participation of those directly or indirectly affected by their operations.

The book is an important addition to the existing literature, filling an important gap with a systematic country level approach to the phenomenon. A particular strength of this study is that it used fieldwork and interviews to move past the 'common places' and the numbers that are so easily available in the Internet, to show a more profound and contextualised understanding of land grabs. The comparative exercise would have been more structured if all authors tried to answer some very concrete questions for the different countries. One factor that is particularly interesting is the role of civil society and it would have been a good opportunity to see how it comes to bear on outcomes across countries, but only some of the authors mention it and not consistently.

Laura Bernal-Bermúdez is a lawyer from Colombia with experience in human rights, administrative and constitutional law. Currently she is Research assistant of the Department of Sociology at the University of Oxford, working as a part of a team to develop a database of company human rights abuses around the world. She has worked for the state, in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs; for companies, in a commercial law firm; and with civil society, in Redress and Oxfam GB. She finished her MSc. Human Rights at the LSE and is a DPhil student in the Sociology Department at the University of Oxford. [Read more reviews by Laura.](#)

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